



NEWSLETTER

SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF THE MILITARY



GOVERNOR NOEM ANNOUNCES UPSKILL

Governor Kristi Noem announced the launch of UpSkill, a program to support workers dislocated by COVID-19. UpSkill consists of 22 online certificate programs in high-demand fields, including business, healthcare, information technology, and manufacturing. The programs will begin this fall at the state's four technical colleges.

"South Dakota is poised to bounce back from COVID-19 stronger than ever before. For those looking for a new career path as we get back to normal, UpSkill is here to help you," said Governor Noem. "This educational program will provide a clear pathway to stable careers."

UpSkill participants will earn credentials at little or no cost. The Board of Technical Education and the Department of Labor and Regulation (DLR) are partnering to support UpSkill participants. Participants must be eligible for re-employment assistance through DLR and be deemed a dislocated worker.

Dislocated workers in South Dakota are encouraged to apply for the UpSkill program starting today. After completing an UpSkill program, participants can enter a new career field, advance in their current field, or continue their education.

UpSkill is funded through the Governor's Emergency Education Relief fund as part of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act funding. Participating technical colleges include Lake Area Technical College in Watertown, Mitchell Technical College in Mitchell, Southeast Technical College in Sioux Falls, and Western Dakota Technical College in Rapid City.

More information can be found at www.SDUpSkill.com.

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INTRODUCING



A unique program offering opportunities for South Dakotans to earn certificates from the state's technical colleges at little or no cost



109TH ENGINEER BATTALION CHANGES COMMAND

The South Dakota Army National Guard's 109th Engineer Battalion changed commanders during a ceremony at Range Road Armory in Rapid City, July 23.

Lt. Col. Kevin Huxford, of Rapid City, took command of the unit from Lt. Col. Dennis Bickett, who served in the position since October 2019.

"I'm extremely grateful for the opportunity to take command of the 109th Engineer Battalion," said Huxford. "I enlisted in the 200th Engineer Company in the 1990s and this company was then under the 109th. It's such an honor to be back as a part of this battalion again and in this role - it's fantastic!"

As commander, Huxford will be responsible for about 160 soldiers in the 109th with a mission to coordinate and execute tactical operations involving mobility, counter mobility and survivability tasks on the battlefield.

The 109th also provides command and control for about 400 soldiers in five assigned units throughout the state to support training, administrative, and logistical requirements to maintain readiness in support of state and federal missions.

"I'm excited that we got the 109th back into the South Dakota National Guard footprint," Huxford said. "This battalion has a long and storied history in the SDNG. I'm looking forward to helping write the next chapters for this great unit."

Huxford currently serves as the fulltime state training officer at Joint Force Headquarters and has over 25 years of service in the SDARNG. Bickett will be assigned to Joint Force Headquarters.

"The 109th Engineer Battalion is an outstanding organization with an amazing history, and I'm going to miss it," said Bickett. "It has been a pleasure to be a part of this battalion over the last year, and I want to thank all the officers, NCOs, and soldiers of the 109th for working so hard to increase our readiness."

Huxford, a native of Pierre, began his career in March of 1995 when he enlisted as a bridge crewman in the 200th En. Co. In September 2001, he received a commission as a second lieutenant and was assigned as an engineer platoon leader in Company A, 153rd Engineer Battalion.

Over the course of his career, Huxford has held a variety of staff, training, operations and administrative officer positions, which included assignments in the 153rd Engineer Battalion, 152nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, 109th Regional Support Group, Recruiting and Retention Battalion and Joint Force Headquarters. He also served as commander of the 155th Engineer Company.

Huxford is also a combat veteran and served on two deployments overseas. He deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom from December 2003 - March 2005 with Company A, 153rd En. Bn., and during Operation Enduring Freedom from July 2013 - January 2014 with the 152nd CSSB.



MESSAGE FROM SDDVA SECRETARY WHITLOCK

Thousands of veterans will return to school in the next few weeks, and it is important that they understand and utilize their GI Bill® benefits in the pursuit of their education. While the GI Bill® covers nearly every imaginable school related expense from tuition, books, fees, and even a living stipend, we understand that utilizing this benefit can be confusing at times.

The GI Bill® is one of the best benefits of being a military member. This great program helps service members, veterans, and families reach their education goals. However, each program is administrated differently, depending on a person's eligibility and duty status.

There are resources to assist veterans and their families obtain information about how to use their GI Bill® benefits. This information includes how to take advantage of scholarships, how to find out more about housing allowances, book supplies, stipends, on-the-job training programs, apprenticeship programs, survivor and dependents assistance or transferring benefits.

Here are some resources available for veterans and families:

County and Tribal Veterans Service Officers – (contact information can be found at: <https://vetaffairs.sd.gov/veteransserviceofficers/locatevso.aspx>).

Campus Veterans Resource Centers and Certifying Officials (contact information can be found at: <http://vetaffairs.sd.gov/resources/colleges.aspx>).

South Dakota's State Certifying Officials Shane Olivier (shane.olivier@state.sd.us) and Ryan Fowler (ryan.fowler@state.sd.us).

These leaders recognize the specific needs and challenges veterans face in transitioning. Their goal is to empower veterans and military-affiliated students to succeed in their educational and vocational goals. It's investing in the future of America.



PURPLE HEART RECOGNITION DAY

At the request of the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs, Gov. Kristi Noem has proclaimed Friday, Aug. 7, 2020, as “Purple Heart Recognition Day,” calling on all South Dakotans to honor those men and women who are recipients of the Purple Heart Medal.

The Purple Heart, our nation’s oldest military medal, is awarded to those service men and women who have borne the battle, sacrificing life and limb.

“August 7th is a day to honor those brave men and women who have earned the Purple Heart,” said Greg Whitlock, Secretary of the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs. “It unites our country in recognizing the sacrifices of those who have risked everything in serving our great nation.”

The Governor encourages all South Dakotans to set aside time on Aug. 7 to honor our heroes who have been honored with the Purple Heart. “It is important for all Americans to learn the history of this important military award and the sacrifices made by the recipients,” said Gov. Noem.

“Our military remains as strong as it has ever been. America’s veterans have been defined by the virtues of selfless service, sacrifice and devotion to duty,” said Whitlock. “These men and women, who serve and have served, are the flesh and blood of American exceptionalism.”



VA AND PARTNER AGENCIES ANNOUNCE COVID-19 INSIGHTS PARTNERSHIP

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), along with the Departments of Energy (DOE) and Health and Human Services (HHS) announced the formation of the COVID-19 Insights Partnership, an initiative to coordinate and share health data as well as research and expertise to aid in the fight against COVID-19.

The COVID-19 Insights Partnership creates a framework for VA and HHS to utilize DOE's world-leading high-performance computing (HPC) and artificial intelligence resources to conduct COVID-19 research and analyze health data that would otherwise not be possible.

"Veterans served this country by putting on the uniform and protecting American interests overseas and now their health data will help in the fight against COVID-19 here at home," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. "President Trump is marshalling all the resources he has available in the federal government to fight the virus and veterans should be proud of the role they're playing."

"The Department of Energy is proud to be a member of the COVID-19 Insights Partnership," said Secretary of Energy Dan Brouillette. "Our nation's understanding of COVID-19 has already benefitted greatly from our world-leading high-performance computing and artificial intelligence resources and we look forward to continuing our coordination across federal departments and agencies in the fight against this virus."

"This unprecedented data and computing partnership is the latest addition to President Trump's whole-of-government effort against COVID-19," said HHS Secretary Alex Azar. "The volume and quality of the data HHS has on COVID-19 has advanced by leaps and bounds in recent months. The Department of Energy's world-class resources will help us derive new insights from the data we gather to help patients and protect our country."

Research and analysis conducted by the COVID-19 Insights Partnership will focus on vaccine and therapeutic development and outcomes, virology and other critical scientific topics to understand COVID-19 better. HHS and VA will provide additional updates and information on research projects as it becomes available.

Summit, the United States' fastest supercomputer, located at DOE's Oak Ridge National Laboratory, is accelerating COVID-19 research by running large scale, complex analyses on a vast amount of health data. Summit's unmatched capacity to analyze massive integrated datasets and divine insights will help researchers identify and advance potential treatments and enhance outcomes for COVID-19 patients with unprecedented speed.

The partnership expands upon recent efforts by the Trump Administration to leverage cutting-edge technologies in the fight against COVID-19, such as the [COVID-19 High Performance Computing Consortium](#), which provides researchers worldwide with HPC resources and expertise from leading industry, Federal Government, and academia partners to accelerate the COVID-19 vaccine and therapeutic research.

VA SURVEY TO COLLECT CUSTOMER FEEDBACK ON EDUCATION BENEFITS

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) today announced the launching of its Veterans Signals (VSignals) surveys to assess education benefits processes.

VA's [Veterans Benefits Administration](#) (VBA) will email one of three surveys to randomly selected Veterans and beneficiaries who have recently interacted with VA's [education benefits program](#).

The survey focuses on the experience at one of three critical touchpoints in the GI Bill journey: either applying for benefits, enrolling in school or receiving education benefits offered through VBA. VA provides education benefits to more than 900,000 beneficiaries annually.

"VA is using VSignals as part of a strategy to leverage customer experience data," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. "The surveys give beneficiaries an opportunity to provide direct feedback on VA's performance. We are constantly searching for ways to better serve the nation's Veterans."

As part of its ongoing commitment to improve customer satisfaction, VBA worked with beneficiaries to design the surveys. The results will be used to identify trends in customer experience and design program improvements as necessary. Education participants will have the opportunity to give direct feedback regarding education benefits and services.

Direct feedback, from Veterans and other beneficiaries, is a key component of VBA's three-part customer experience framework which is to:

- **Listen** to our customers.
- **Improve** processes, benefits and services based on what we hear.
- **Empower** employees to act.

VA's [Veterans Experience Office \(VEO\)](#) built the VSignals platform based on industry best practices for use across VA to collect feedback and transform the experience Veterans have when they interact with VA. Since June 2017, VSignals has surveyed more than 28.8 million participants, receiving 5.2 million responses with an average return rate of 17.9%.

Learn more about [the G.I. Bill or to apply for educational benefits](#).



UPCOMING EVENTS

Aug 5-11—HyVee Stores “Operation Helpful Smile” DAV Fundraiser—Sioux Falls
Aug 24—Barrel House Day of Giving for Midwest Honor Flight—Sioux Falls
Aug 24-27—SDDVA Annual Benefit School—Ramkota Conference Center—Pierre
Sep 3—Veterans Day at the SD State Fair
Sep 3-7—SD State Fair
Sep 5—DAV/727 Poker Run—Swiftel Center—Brookings
Sep 7—State Offices Closed
Sep 11—VABHHCS VSO Congressional Forum—VFW Post 1273—Rapid City—10:00 am (MT)
Sep 18—POW/MIA Day Ceremony—Veterans Memorial Park—Sioux Falls—6:30 pm (CT)
Nov 13—VABHHCS VSO Congressional Forum—Domiciliary Auditorium—Hot Springs VAMC—10:00 am (MT)
Dec 1—Governor’s State of the Budget Address—1:00 pm (CT)
Jan 12—Governor’s State of the State Address—1:00 pm (CT)
Jan 13—SDDVA/SD Veterans Council Legislative Reception

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